

# **Testimony to the United States Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee Hearing on "Marketing Violence to Children"**

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"The goal....was to create the ultimate weapon--an unstable killing machine, incapable of emotion, impervious to conventional weapons."

"With these six bad boys figures, bad has never been so good."

"This warrior.....was reconstructed in the heat of battle from extra body parts.....found lying around."

"Live the invasion. Defend N.Y. City with a..micro battle play set."

"Fueled by V.'s madness, there's no telling what this dangerous, blushing bride will do next. Make no mistake, the Bride of V. is as lethal as they come."

"The boss of the Belch Brigade.....is a savage warrior with the disgusting ability to fire nasty warts from his body."

".....started out mugging old ladies for their Social Security checks, moved on to robbing convenience stores, then learned the ropes about drug dealing while serving time in the state penitentiary."

Quotes from the back of action figure toy boxes. (All are linked to movies, TV programs, or video games and marketed to children as young as "4 & up")

I am a child psychologist and Professor of Education at Wheelock College where I teach courses entitled "Teaching Children in Violent Times" and "Media Education in a Violent Society". I have written six books on topics related to these subjects including Remote Control Childhood? Combating the Hazards of Media Culture. I welcome this opportunity today to share with you what I have learned over the past 20 years about how the marketing of violence to children through media and toys is harming them. I will also share what I have learned about what can be done to develop an effective response.

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Those shocked about the recent tragedy in Littleton, and the ones in Jonesboro and Springfield before it, have not been paying attention. Children growing up today are swimming in a culture of violence that has its effects--from subtle to deadly--on every child, family, and school. Every ten seconds a child is abused or neglected in this country. Every hundred minutes a child is killed by a firearm, that is 14 children a day, equal to the number of children that died in Littleton.<sup>1</sup>

And then there is entertainment violence, a media culture that glorifies violence--through images, actions, and models marketed to children through television, toys and other products, video games, Hollywood films, and the Internet. On TV alone, children will see over 8,000 murders and 100,000 other acts of violence by the time they finish elementary school, including 20-25 acts of violence per hour during commercial programming designated for children (versus 5-6 acts per hour on prime time programs).<sup>2</sup>

Most people do not realize that it has not always been this way. There was a turning point in how violence was marketed to children to which much of what we see today can be traced. We also can trace a rapid increase in youth violence to that time. Understanding this shift provides a powerful lens for helping us understand the nature of the current problem with youth violence and what to do about it. It also can help us realize that, we must direct our efforts to deal with this problem at much earlier age than is generally discussed. The roots of the problem of marketing violence to children are established when children are very young.

As an expert in how violence affects children's development and behavior, I first became aware of a dramatic change in how violence was marketed to young children in 1985. The parents and teachers in the workshops and lectures I gave around the country began voicing alarm

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<sup>1</sup> Children's Defense Fund. (1998). The State of America's Children Yearbook 1998. Washington, DC: Children's Defense Fund.

<sup>2</sup> Donnerstein, E., Slaby, R. & Eron, L. (1994). "The Mass Media and Youth Aggression" in Reason for Hope: A Psychological Perspective on Youth and Violence, Eron, L, Gentry, J. & Schlegel, P. (Eds.). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

about the escalating levels of violence they were seeing in children's behavior and play. They reported that something was wrong--more children seemed obsessed with war play and violence and more children were hurting each other when they had disagreements.

When I began to explore what might be causing parents' and teachers' concerns, I found that there had been a massive change in children's play culture that could be directly traced to the deregulation of children's television by Federal Communications Commission in 1984. This made it possible to market toys and other products with TV programs for the first time. Quickly after deregulation, the early childhood culture became saturated with violence. Whole lines of toys appeared that were highly realistic replicas of what children saw on the screen. Soon media cross feeding began where makers of movies, TV programs, and video games joined together with manufacturers and retailers to market products to children around violent themes--toys, underwear, bed sheets, breakfast cereals, lunch boxes. Many children could literally go to bed and wake up with the images from violent TV shows and movies all around them making it hard to get the violent images off of their minds. In sum, deregulation led to the birth of a vast new violent media culture that permeates most aspects of children's lives from very early ages.<sup>3</sup>

Each new, "successful" violent TV show marketed to children was more violent than the one that preceded it. The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles TV show in the late 1980's had an average of 50 acts of violence per episode, whereas in the early 1990's, each episode of the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers TV show averaged 100 acts of violence.<sup>4</sup> And this new method of marketing violence was extremely lucrative. Within one year of deregulation 9 of the 10 best selling toys had TV shows, 7 of which had violent themes. In 1994, the Power Rangers reached an industry pinnacle with world-wide sales surpassing \$1 billion, approximately the amount that was spent on children's books in the US that year. Since that time the situation has

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<sup>3</sup> Carlsson-Paige, N. & Levin, D. (1990). Who's Calling the Shots? How to Respond Effectively to Children's Fascination with War Play, War Toys & Violent TV. Gabriola Island, BC, CAN: New Society Publishers.

<sup>4</sup> Lisosky, M. (1995). "Battling Standards Worldwide--'Mighty Morphin Power Rangers' Fight for Their Lives." Paper presented at the World Summit for Children and Television, 12-16 March, Melbourne, Australia.

only escalated; for instance, we now have highly violent blockbuster movies with PG 13 or R ratings--such as "Jurassic Park," "Starship Troopers," and "Small Soldiers,"--that sell millions of dollars of toys labeled as being for children ages 4 or 5 and up. Before the opening of the new series of "Star Wars" movies this week, the sale of products has already surpassed 4.5 billion dollars.<sup>5</sup> And then, in recent years has been the proliferation of videogames--many of which are extremely violent--whose sales are in the billions. Media-linked war toys prime preschool children for the video games violence they soon graduate into when they are a bit older.

My knowledge of child development and children's play helped me quickly realize that the violent media culture created by deregulation could have catastrophic effects on children's behavior and development. First, I am deeply concerned about what the violence that is marketed to children is teaching them about how people treat each other. The lessons usually directly contradict what most parents try to teach. The foundations for later social behavior, including violence, are laid when children are young. Research supports the conclusion that fairly accurate predictions can be made of violent behavior in adulthood by how children behave at the age of eight.<sup>6</sup> In light of this finding, it is crucial to pay special attention to the lessons that the marketing of violence is teaching to children under eight-years-old.

What are those lessons entertainment violence is teaching to the young children growing up in the US today? Gruesomely violent video games and episodes of cartoons show children what the role of violence in the world is. Violence is fun. We do it for play. No one gets hurt. Evil-looking and evil-acting toys--that could only come from the imaginations of adults--add to the "excitement". Because of how they think, young children believe what they see; they do not make clear distinctions between real life and what they see on the screen--which can become especially deadly when this confusion is with "pretend" versus real guns. When they see violent TV shows and movies that seem to be made for children and toys

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<sup>5</sup> Time Magazine, April 26, 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Eron, L. & Slaby, R. (1994). "Introduction" in Reason for Hope: A Psychological Perspective on Youth and Violence, Eron, L, Gentry, J. & Schlegel, P. (Eds.). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

that go with the shows, they think this violence is for them. Children take these messages and incorporate them into their behavior and play, trying them out with each other, using them as building blocks for their social, emotional and intellectual development. Violence becomes a bigger and bigger proportion of what they learn about the world. And telling them that the violence they see is "pretend" or even "bad" usually takes a back seat to the excitement and power that this entertainment violence seems to provide. Why are we surprised when children come to see violence as a part of having fun and a normal part of everyday interactions?

The focus of adult concern is often placed on the violence children see in the media. This is definitely a central part of the problem and it must be seriously addressed. On average, children do spend 3-4 hours in front of the screen each day watching TV programs and videotapes, and playing video and computer games. This use of their free time takes away essential opportunities for interacting directly in their world, the way we know children learn best about such things as: how to control and master objects and events in their world; how to interact with others and develop skills for solving conflicts that come up; and, learn words to use to describe and work out their conflicts. And then, to make matters even more worrisome, as children watch the screen, much of what they see is violent. Research shows that media violence does contribute to: increased levels of violent behavior, imitation of violent heroes, desensitization to the effects of violence, increased fearfulness, an increased appetite for violence and a general climate of disrespect.<sup>7</sup>

For young children, the dangerous lessons taught by the violence they see on the screen are amplified many times over by all the marketing that goes on with the shows--namely, the violent media-linked toys and other products that permeate their daily lives and often take over their play. Creative play is an essential part of children's development and learning. They use play to master their experiences. As they play and try to figure things out, they learn to be creative problem solvers and as a result, they feel the sense of internal power and control that mastery can bring. And, we know by what they bring to their play what they need to work on--if they bring violent themes to their play it usually means they have questions, fears,

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<sup>7</sup> American Medical Association. (1996). Physician Guide to Media Violence. Chicago, IL: AMA.

confusions that they are trying to work out. It makes perfect sense that when they see violence on the screen children will bring it to their play. From this point of view, we would have predicted just what teachers and parents saw with the rapid increase of violent children's media and toys that came in 1984 with deregulation--a sudden increase in violent play among children because they had more issues of violence to work out.

As I began to study the war play parents and teachers were so concerned about in 1985, I made a startling discovery.<sup>8</sup> The new media-linked toys that provided highly realistic replicas for acting out what was seen on the screen were taking control of play away from many children. They were showing children how to play by channeling them into imitating the scripts of the shows they saw on the screen. Imitative play seemed to be replacing creative play. The toys also seemed to keep children focused on violence. This kind of imitative play, when it is violent, *helps children focus on and learn* the violent lessons from the screen at the expense of other potentially more positive lessons. It also undermines their ability to use play to develop creativity and problem solving skills necessary for all forms of learning or to experience the sense of control and power that teaches them they can work out an idea or problem on their own. Ironically, in the midst of all the "pseudo" power that media-linked war toys and play provide, children are often left feeling powerless on the issues that really count. They are less likely to experience the sense of internal power and control that they need to deal effectively with their world issues in a nonviolent manner. And they are more likely to turn to violence whenever they feel weak or powerless.

In 1994, I conducted a national survey of how teachers saw the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers affecting the children in their classrooms supports this view. The results helped me formulate many of the conclusions I have drawn here today. Ninety-seven percent of the teachers surveyed felt the Power Rangers were negatively affecting children. Their concerns focused on seeing increased levels of aggression in children's everyday interactions, increased levels of aggressive play where children imitated what they saw on the screen

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<sup>8</sup> Carlsson-Paige, N. & Levin, D. (1987). The War Play Dilemma. New York: Teachers College Press.

<sup>9</sup> Levin, D. & Carlsson-Paige, N. (September, 1995). "The Might Morphin Power  
Levin

and often hurt each other, and confusion among children as to what violence they saw in the show was "pretend" and what was real.<sup>9</sup> In the words of teachers who responded to the survey, "The Power Rangers seem to be taking a good part of the children's energy and turning it into the negative behavior that is modeled for them on the show. Kids are getting hurt." "I feel the Power Rangers encourage more violent play and have interfered with imaginative, cooperative play." And, "The show says it is teaching about good versus evil, but all the children seem to remember is the fight."

Since the time of that survey, the concerns I have heard from parents and teachers about how entertainment violence is affecting children have only increased. And now, in recent years, we are seeing an alarming escalation in both the quantity and nature of violence among youth. The homicide rate of children in the US has almost doubled since deregulation.<sup>10</sup> The children committing the crimes as this increase has occurred are from the new "deregulation generation." These are the children whom it will cost taxpayers over \$1 million each to lock up in prison for life when they end up acting out the murder and mayhem they have learned from entertainment violence since childhood. Is it any wonder that those children who have been most affected and have ready access to a real gun think it is okay to use that gun to deal with a conflict?

But these are not the only youth who should be the focus of our attention.

The rising levels of disrespect toward each other and adults, premature adolescent rebellions where children reject adult judgment and authority at younger and younger ages, the alarming increase in acts of intolerance and sexual harassment in middle and high schools, the skyrocketing costs for heightened security measures in schools in rich as well as poor communities--these are all potential outgrowths of an environment that replaces the positive lessons of the adults who care about children with the constant message that hurtful behavior toward others is fun and exciting and a regular part of everyday life.

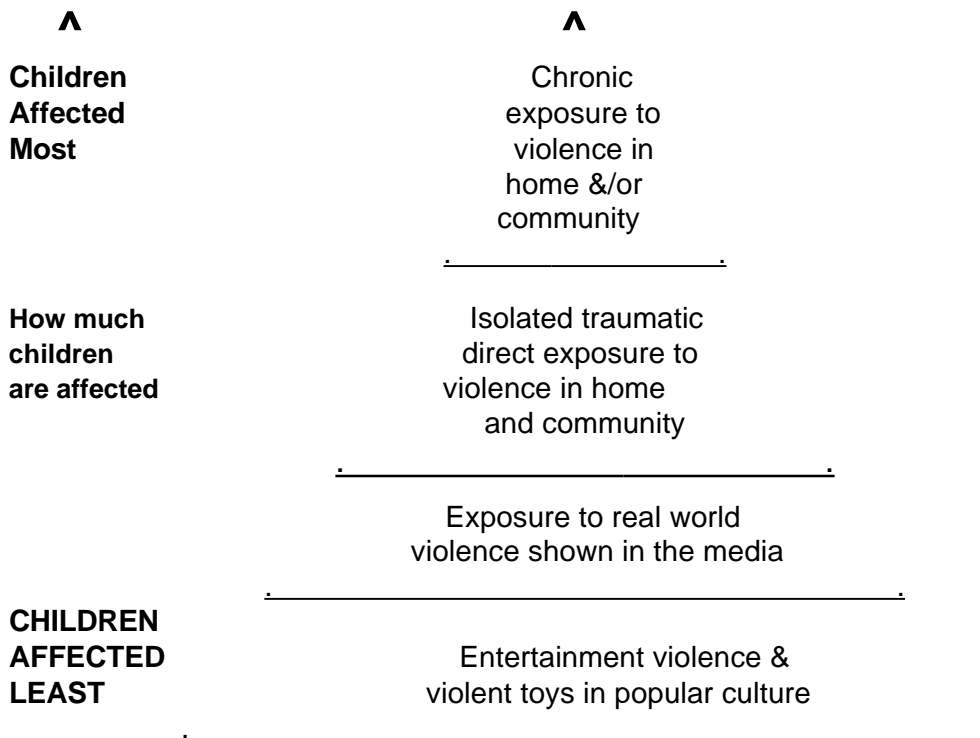
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Rangers: Teachers Voice Concern." Young Children.

<sup>10</sup> Children's Defense Fund. (1998). The State of America's Children Yearbook 1998. Washington, DC: Children's Defense Fund.

Now that the floodgates have been opened, I would like to talk about what can be done to solve the problems that the marketing of violence to children has caused? Many claim, that in the midst of all the factors that are contributing to violence in society, marketing violence to children is hardly where we should place the focus of our concern. I have found it helpful to address this issue by thinking of the range of ways violence affects children as falling along a continuum as represented in Figure 1--"The Continuum of Violence in Children's Lives." At the bottom is entertainment violence (which is at the bottom of the pyramid because it is most prevalent in society and touches most children's lives). At the top are the most extreme forms of violence--chronic and direct exposure in the immediate environment (which fewer children experience but which builds onto the exposure to the other forms of violence below it on the pyramid). The degree to which children are affected by violence is likely to increase as they move up the continuum.

**FIGURE 1. THE CONTINUUM OF VIOLENCE IN CHILDREN'S LIVES<sup>11</sup>**



<sup>11</sup> From: Levin, D. (1994). Teaching Young Children in Violent Times: Building A Peaceable Classroom. Cambridge, MA: Educators for Social Responsibility.  
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Figure 1 can help us see that media and other forms of entertainment violence are an essential part of any effort to bring violence in society among youth back under control. So where should we begin. We often hear, especially from the media and toy industries that are profiting most from the marketing of violence to children, that it is parents' job to decide what is and is not appropriate for their children and to teach their children how to be well-behaved and moral. This argument often serves as an excuse for abdicating all responsibility for creating or changing the current situation. Even in the wake of the Littleton shootings, we have been hearing similar arguments around the country.

There is no question but that parents do have an important role to play in protecting their children from the marketing of violence to them.<sup>12</sup> To the extent possible, they should protect their children from exposure to that violence. They can help their children work through the violence that gets in despite efforts to screen it out. They also need to teach peaceful alternatives to the violence their children see on the screen and in the popular culture.

But to put the entire burden on parents, as is now so often the case, is a totally unrealistic and even, irresponsible response. How is telling parents to "do a better job" going to translate into changed parental behavior without creating an environment that supports them in their efforts? Most of the parents with whom I have worked are trying to do a good job. In a recent USA Today poll (September, 1998), 90% of the parents surveyed said they think parenting today is harder than in the past. Almost 70% said they are trying harder but doing a worse job than their parents did. And 76% blamed media violence and too much emphasis on materialism for some of their problems.

Parents need help not lectures about what they are doing wrong. To

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<sup>12</sup> Levin, D. (1998). Remote Control Childhood? Combating the Hazards of Media Culture. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

be a good parent today, you need to be more skillful and know more than ever before. Few parents (and that includes myself as the parent of a teenage son who is a member of the first deregulation generation) feel adequately equipped to deal with the radical changes that have occurred in society in how violence is marketed to children. It takes a great deal of time, energy, and knowledge to make informed decisions about how to deal effectively with the endless barrage of entertainment violence in children's lives. Once the decisions are made it takes a great deal of skill putting them into practice with children in effective ways. Even when they try, parents report that no amount of effort can adequately protect their children from the violence that surrounds them. And what about the parents whose resources are already stretched to the limit providing for the basic needs of their families? Society should support parents in their efforts to do a good job, instead of placing hurdles in parents' way at every turn. Perhaps parents would do a better job of teaching non-violence to their children if society made it possible for them to do so.

As blame for the problem has been placed on parents, the media and toy industries have been given free reign to continue to rake in enormous profits from the violence they market to children. At the same time, all of society is paying the price for the failure to protect children from the hazards of entertainment violence. Now we are seeing the lessons children learn from the culture of "for-fun" violence being played out every day in classrooms, school yards, homes, and the wider community.

So what can we do? For starters, we must all acknowledge that many factors have contributed to the rising levels of youth violence and we must make a commitment to begin to do what it takes to rectify them. Once we do, here are examples of the kinds of efforts we need.

Schools have a crucial role to play. For instance, they must develop strategies for counteracting the lessons children are learning about violence. From the earliest grades,<sup>13</sup> schools can make the teaching of conflict

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<sup>13</sup> Levin, D. (1994). Teaching Young Children in Violent Times: Building a Peaceable Classroom. Cambridge, MA: Educators for Social Responsibility.

<sup>14</sup> Carlsson-Paige, N. & Levin, D. (1998). Before Push Comes to Shove: Building Conflict Resolution Skills with Children. Saint Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

<sup>15</sup> Levin, D. (1998). Remote Control Childhood? Combating the Hazards of

resolution<sup>14</sup> and media literacy<sup>15</sup> --both of which can help to counteract the lessons about violence children are learning from the violent media culture-- goals that are as important as the teaching of the 3 R's. In addition, schools and parents need to join forces to develop positive approaches for dealing with entertainment violence and to create a community of parents that work together to make informed decisions about what entertainment violence is and is not okay for their children. To accomplish these tasks, schools will need resources, especially for staff training and development.

Next, those industries that have helped create and profited from the marketing of violence to children also need to recognize that the entire burden of solving this enormous problem cannot be placed solely on parents; the media and toy industries do have an important role to play in shaping the solutions. An important first step would be to recognize they have a responsibility to consider the best interests of children along with their profits when they make decisions about what violence to market to children and how.

Government also has a vital role to play. Measures are needed that limit children's access to guns. In addition, government agencies should take a leadership role in helping society formulate solutions. The Federal Communications Commission, which has overseen the re-regulation of children's TV since 1990, has placed little emphasis on trying to reduce the level of violence in children's media. Now, the FCC could certainly develop the kinds of policies that are needed to effectively protect the interests of children. Another important task is to develop strategies for giving parents the information they need to make informed decisions about what media and other media-linked products are appropriate for their children. This could be accomplished by creating some standardization among the various types of age rating systems so that, for instance, toys marketed with R-rated and PG-13 movies carried ratings similar to the movie. Public education campaigns would also help so that parents were better informed about the hazards of violence marketed to children and effective strategies for dealing with them. The kinds of efforts I am suggesting would be consistent with a

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Media Culture. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

<sup>14</sup> Carlsson-Paige, N. & Levin, D. (1998). Before Push Comes to Shove: Building Conflict Resolution Skills with Children. Saint Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

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long history of the government playing a role in protecting children from hazards in society, such as alcohol and tobacco products.

Finally, we already know a lot, we need to place more emphasis on doing research that will help us better understand how the marketing of violence through media and toys is affecting children and how to better protect them. Shockingly little research has been done to date on these issues. The changes in marketing practices are so recent that the problems that need to be studied have only begun to be identified. In addition, the resources for developing the products of violence that are marketed to children far surpass those of the people who are struggling to counteract their harmful effects. Why should there not be some effort to show toys are psychologically safe for children before they are placed on the market, just as they are currently tested for physical safety?

I would like to conclude by pointing out--as the tragic events in Littleton have made all too clear--that the degree to which a society can survive and thrive depends, to a great extent, on the degree to which it can support parents in their challenging task of raising children to become healthy, contributing members of that society. We all have a vital role to play in creating that kind of supportive environment. We know what needs to be done.

I urge you all to take very seriously your role in helping to solve the problems that have been created by the marketing of violence to children. I urge you all to make a commitment to developing the kinds of policies that are needed to provide effective solutions to this curable problem. I urge you all to work on solutions to a problem that threatens to undermine the well-being of our nation's children, families, and ultimately all of society.

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Attachments:

- Carlsson-Paige, N. & Levin, D. "The Profiteering that Kills Kids," The Boston Globe, March 31, 1998.
- Levin, D. & Carlsson-Paige, N. "Sowing the Seeds of Nonviolence," Education Week, June 3, 1998.
- Levin, D. & Carlsson-Paige, N. "The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers: Teachers Voice Concern," Young Children, September, 1995.
- Levin, D. "Understanding and Responding to the Violence in Children's Lives," Child Care Information Exchange, March, 1995.
- Levin, D. "Play with Violence: Understanding and Responding Effectively." In Play from Birth to Twelve and Beyond, D. Fromberg & D. Bergen (Eds.). NY: Garland Press, 1998.